

# The Meaning of the Last Supper; Communion in the Body and Blood of Christ



**Thrust Statement:** The Eucharistic Meal sets forth the whole of what Christianity is all about.

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-31; Luke 22:7-38; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

How do you approach the Lord's Table? What do you reflect upon as you eat the bread and drink the Cup of Thanksgiving? Do you think of redemption? Do you meditate about forgiveness? Do you consider God's judgment? This Supper should tell one that one deserves God's judgment of punishment a thousandfold. This Meal should cause one to pray seriously: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" ([Matthew 6:12](#)). In this Meal, God exemplifies pardon before the eyes of each participant. One is ever conscious that He implements forgiveness on the Cross. Whoever receives forgiveness through the Cross of Jesus can never remain unchanged. This Feast unfolds the deepest mystery of the Gospel of Christ—forgiveness. When one's relationship with God is made new through the Cross, one's relationship with others will never be the same. This fellowship Meal is a constant reminder of the word of pardon and the deed of reconciliation.

Many Christians do not seem to appreciate the true significance of the Lord's Supper. The Communion is a venerated custom that the body of Christ has participated in since the time Christ instituted His memorial Meal during His last Passover meal with His disciples. Some churches celebrate this Feast on a weekly basis, but, on the other hand, there are churches that neglect this Institution, at least they do not observe it very often. Is the Eucharist one of the dying branches within the Christian community? Is this Supper sacrificed to the times? Has it lost its meaning? Does the Lord's Supper speak a message to you? What is this communication of fellowship in the body and blood of Christ? Does this Meal, to you, signify unity among God's people? Does this Meal remind you of the priestly prayer of Jesus in [John 17](#)? Listen to the prayer of the Son of God as He prepares for His "finished" work of redemption for lost humanity—death upon the Cross:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,<sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.<sup>22</sup> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:<sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (**John 17:20-23**).

Is the Communion a constant reminder of the message of the Cross? Christian unity can only be found in the message that Jesus is God's Way of salvation. It is only in this message of the Cross that one can find true unity. In this Meal, God has a meaning for His people. God speaks to His people through this activity—eating and drinking in remembrance of Christ. Paul, as he writes to the Corinthians, gives a saying from Christ that neither Matthew nor Mark records: “**Do this in remembrance of me**” (**1 Corinthians 11:24**). This Institution has always been a constant reminder to the Church that God lays upon the hearts of His people the message of the Gospel in and through the sharing of the bread and wine.

One cannot partake of this Repast without a consciousness of one's need of redemption. This Meal binds individuals to one another. God reaches out to His people, not just through the verbal preaching of the Word, but through this act of commemoration in which the grace of God is reenacted, as it were, in the hearts of His people. In this act, God also addresses His children through the eye as well as through the verbal telling of the story of redemption. The Lord's Supper is a reminder that God reaches out to the down-and-out. This Meal is an unbroken reminder of God sending His Son to seek and to save the lost. This Feast is a firm reminder that even in divorce, God is still reaching out to heal and to forgive the broken hearted. This Communion is for sinners saved by grace.

The phrase “in remembrance of me” calls for focus upon the death of Christ. The community of Christ can never get away from the Jesus of history. Whenever the church assembles, there is, and must be, a corporate memory of Him who came to rescue both men and women from condemnation. The Lord's Supper is a constant reminder of the Incarnate God. Paul uses the Greek word *ἀναμνησις* (*anamnēsis*, “reminder, remembrance”) in **1 Corinthians 11:24, 25** to call attention to reflection upon redemption. The first reference is to the bread and the second reference is to the cup (His blood). As one eats the bread and drinks the cup, he or she stands between two worlds—the past and the future.

Christians not only reflect upon the past—incarnation and crucifixion—but also beyond—Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father. The beyond is also found in **11:26**: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” <sup>[1]</sup> One can hardly reflect upon the phrase “until he comes” without a reflection upon Paul's closing words in this Epistle: “If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord<sup>b</sup>” (**15:22**)! “Come, O Lord” in Aramaic is *μαρὰν θάνα* (*marana qa*). As Christians gather around the Lord's Table, they are bound up, as it were, with a corporate memory of real historical events. These emblems are constant reminders of His betrayal by Judas, His crucifixion upon Golgotha, His empty tomb, His appearance in the upper room after His resurrection, and His final return with His angels “in the

twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (15:52).

In **1 Corinthians 11**, Paul is conscious of the standing of the past as well as the future, that is to say, he is conscious between the memory and the hope—“Do this in remembrance of me” and “You proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” In this present world, Christians need something that lies beyond to make life meaningful. Since all human history is a pilgrimage, everyone needs a supernatural reality that reaches beyond this earthly existence. In the Lord’s Supper, there is a sense in which Christians are rehearsing, or anticipating, the day when the elect will be home, that is, gathered around the Father’s Table.

As Christians reflect upon the Lord’s Supper, this consideration is an endless notice that Christianity is a historical religion. In the Supper, one is confronted with the mystery of time and the mystery of eternity. This Meal is a perpetual refresher of Christ offering His body as a sin offering for the sins of the world. In this Feast, one comes face to face with the eternal activity of God’s passion for lost humanity. The Communion is a constant reminder of the past, the present, and the future. This Table Fellowship paints a picture of how God bore our sins in the cross of Christ. Emil Brunner gives an outstanding analysis of forgiveness as he seeks to express the wonder and miracle of forgiveness, which is what the Lord’s Supper is all about. In his sermon on “The Merciful King and the Unforgiving Servant,” he writes with penetrating insight:

When it happens to one of us that God forgives all his debts, a miracle happens, the greatest miracle of all. Forgiveness of sin is an even greater miracle than the resurrection of the dead. For the resurrected Lazarus had to die again. But a debt forgiven is forgiven for all eternity. Forgiveness of sin means not only the breaking down of a barrier between God and us; it is at the same time the building up of the right relationship between the Creator and us. Forgiveness of sin, acceptance of God’s mercy, is nothing less than sonship, the establishment of communion between God and us. Whenever this occurs, something unheard of, a great miracle takes place. Truly the very opposite of the self-evident! The very opposite of what we may know in advance or by ourselves.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the Lord’s Supper, one can hear the words of Jesus: “Go in peace, your sins are forgiven.” As one eats the bread and drinks the wine, one is reminded over and over that one has forgiveness of sins and friendship with God through the work of Christ upon the Cross. In this Banquet of the church, one also witnesses the performance of an act of fellowship, an act that signifies the unity of the body of Christ. As a congregation, both men and women join as one family in this corporate Festival. The Lord’s Supper is a corporate act of the body of Christ. In this eating and drinking together, one witnesses Christian solidarity of fellowship within the body of Christ. Since the bread and wine are constant reminders of His grace, His mercy, and His peace, this realization should ever be a reminder of the corporate aspect of this unique fellowship in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. As one reflects upon this involvement, one can hardly fail to recall the words of Paul:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?<sup>17</sup> Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we

all partake of the one loaf (**1 Corinthians 10:16-17**).

Through this fellowship of eating and drinking, one finds an expression of the truth that this relationship is grounded in an action of God. In the Lord's Supper, one detects that each person is joined to the congregation of God's children in such a way that is not visualized through just the mere preaching of the Word. In this form of proclamation, one perceives that this fellowship is grounded in an act of Jesus upon Calvary. The deeper meaning of this Rite conveys the vicarious passion and death of Jesus upon the Cross for a dying humanity. Taking part in this Feast reminds everyone that life is one continuous act of worship. When Christians assemble to break bread together, this eating and drinking, as such, is the revealer of God's righteousness and love, which is about His justifying grace.

As stated above, the message of the Gospel is conveyed through the Lord's Supper. In this Banquet, one is reminded that Christ became a curse for the human race. This Supper rings a bell, as it were, that Christ was made sin for the world. In this Supper, one is aware that one's life is hidden with Christ in God. As one joins in this Meal, one is reminded again that everything necessary for one's forgiveness has been done in and through Jesus' death upon the Tree. In this eating and drinking, one discovers that God has done what must be done to reconcile both men and women unto Himself. In this Ceremonial Dinner, one is ever mindful that God not only speaks the message of redemption, but that He also reenacts this message of redemption. One cannot take part in this Feast without a recollection of this costly forgiveness. This Supper is a perpetual reminder that something had to be done about guilt. In the Lord's Supper, one witnesses an inconceivable exchange—His death for your life. It is through faith that one receives this grace that is portrayed in the Lord's Supper. One cannot assemble around this Table without reflection upon the death of Jesus as the atoning act of God.<sup>[3]</sup>

Even though this message is written primarily in the third person, let us, just for a moment, turn to the second person. What does this Supper mean to *you*? As *you* participate in this Meal, do *you* see the passion of God for sinful humanity? Do *you* see God bearing the sins of the world? Do *you* see the incarnation? Do *you* see the coming of eternity into the midst of time? The Lord's Supper is a persistent communication of God's scheme of redemption in and through Christ. F. J. Leenhardt says, "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper derives its meaning from the conditions of the redemptive action of God in Christ."<sup>[4]</sup> A reflection upon the Lord's Supper is contemplation upon the past. When one remembers the life, death, and burial of Jesus in the Supper, the past becomes reactive in one's thinking about the atonement made upon Calvary. As a Memorial, this reflection calls to mind one's deliverance from the world of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son.

## CONCLUSION

In this Supper, one is always conscious that one is the object of God's redemptive action. This biblical Memorial is a reminder of God's divine action of eternal newness—a new creation in Christ Jesus (**2 Corinthians 5:17**). In this Supper, one is put in mind that the past reaches out and joins the present. This Table is a means of teaching God's community of believers about the atonement and Jesus' coming again. Just as in baptism, Christians participate in this great redemption. Through this Feast, one is ever mindful that God's grace is ever active. This Meal assures the permanent actuality of the redemptive

act of God in the memory of His children. When God's children remember the past, this remembrance makes the atonement present and actual in their lives. In the Supper, the past and the present mingle. This eating and drinking will always keep alive this redemptive action on God's part until Jesus comes again. This Memorial Meal demonstrates God's love and pardon. Remember, the purpose of the bread and wine is to take one back to the scene of redemption. In this Meal, the whole of what Christianity is all about is expressed.

In the Lord's Supper, one witnesses the victory of Jesus over the powers of hell. Why do Christians celebrate this Ceremony as a corporate body? In this celebration, the church is reminded of its unity through the atonement of Jesus upon Calvary. In this Supper, Christians behold the broken body of Christ on the Cross at Golgotha. This crucifixion is symbolized in the broken bread in the Communion. Paul writes in this fashion about the bread: "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,<sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (**1 Corinthians 11:23-24**). In the same manner, the outpoured wine is representative of His outpoured blood upon the Cross. Matthew, too, writes about the symbolism in the wine:

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you.<sup>28</sup> This is my blood of the b covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (**Matthew 26:27-29**).<sup>[5]</sup>

Through the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christians are able to share in this atonement of Christ upon the Tree. Here at Calvary, Jesus crushed the head of Satan. Emil Brunner captures this defeat of Satan's powers very graphically when he writes:

Then the death of Jesus Christ, from being a catastrophe, becomes the victory of God over you and your godlessness, then He draws you into His own eternal life, enabling you to share in His resurrection and making you by this means a new creation.<sup>[6]</sup>

As a "new creation," Christians no longer live just for themselves. When Christ enters the picture, individualism, as such, comes to an end. There is to be a transformation of the human personality. In Corinth, Christians were divided into various camps (**1 Corinthians 1:10-17**), but this mindset of individualism did not uphold the unity of the Sacrament:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?<sup>17</sup> Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (**10:16-17**).

Christians are to work for unity within the body of Christ. Because there is "one loaf" (Christ), Christians are to maintain unity within the body of Christ. Why? Believers still represent "one loaf"—"We, who are many, are one body." Some saints in Corinth

forgot about the true meaning of the Lord's Supper. Thus, Paul seeks to nip-in-the-bud the divisive spirit of individualism:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.<sup>18</sup> In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.<sup>19</sup> No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.<sup>20</sup> When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,<sup>21</sup> for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.<sup>22</sup> Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not (**11:17-22**)!

The divisions placed in question the true meaning of the Lord's Supper. The congregation should be a fellowship of men and women in unity, but Paul presents a shameless picture of social cleavage, which is still rampant among many Christian fellowships. The proclamation in the Lord's Supper is intended to awaken and strengthen faith in the Lord Jesus and to create unity among His followers. In conclusion, one should never forget that the Last Supper is related to the redemptive meaning of His death. One cannot eat this bread and drink this cup without a consciousness of the condescending initiative of God who seeks to redeem sinners. The bread and wine in the Last Supper derives its meaning from the redemptive action of God in Christ Jesus. What does this Memorial Meal mean to you?

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[1] All citations are from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), unless stated otherwise.

b In Aramaic the expression *Come, O Lord* is *Marana tha*.

[2] Emil Brunner, "The Merciful King and the Unforgiving Servant," in *Sowing and Reaping: The Parables of Jesus* (London: The Trinity Press, 1964), 63

[3] I owe a great deal of my insight to Donald Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments and Other Papers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957). Even though he has much to offer, still I do not always agree with his explanations. He, like so many of us, allows his traditions to color his interpretations of various texts to give credence to his presuppositions

[4] Oscar Cullmann and F. J. Leenhardt, *Essays on the Lord's Supper* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1958), 66.

b Some manuscripts *the new*

<sup>[5]</sup> See a forthcoming essay, “The Meaning of the Eucharistic Sayings in the Synoptics and Pauline writings,” for an examination of the Greek syntax of the Matthean account.

<sup>[6]</sup> Emil Brunner, “The Meaning of the Last Supper,” in *The Great Invitation and Other Sermons* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 122.